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ABSTRACT

In the face of today's challenging social and family issues, many new efforts are underway to help children and families. One solution that many communities have adopted is the establishment of a collaborative partnership that involves all the relevant partners--home, school, and community--in the planning and monitoring of services for children. Unfortunately, achieving a strong partnership with meaningful participation can often be difficult and time-consuming. This article focuses on a set of training materials that has been developed to assist community partnerships in their efforts. These materials highlight eight elements of continuity and successful partnerships: (1) families as partners, (2) shared leadership, (3) comprehensive/responsive services, (4) culture and home language, (5) communication, (6) knowledge and skill development, (7) appropriate care and education, and (8) evaluation of partnership success. Results from a field study that included more than 200 reviewers and 8 pilot sites are summarized. Results indicate that a majority of reviewers found the training materials easy to understand, relevant to their work, and up-to-date. In addition, data gathered from the pilot sites indicate that the partnerships found the materials practical and useful for addressing a variety of issues, including time constraints, communication gaps, differences in professional training, and funding limitations. (Author)

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Table of Contents

ED 471 905

The Continuity Framework: A Tool for Building Home, School, and Community Partnerships

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1

Abstract

In the face of today's challenging social and family issues, many new efforts are underway to help children and families. One solution that many communities have adopted is the establishment of a collaborative partnership that involves all the relevant partners--home, school, and community--in the planning and monitoring of services for children. Unfortunately, achieving a strong partnership with meaningful participation can often be difficult and time-consuming. This article focuses on a set of training materials that has been developed to assist community partnerships in their efforts. These materials highlight eight elements of continuity and successful partnerships: (1) families as partners, (2) shared leadership, (3) comprehensive/responsive services, (4) culture and home language, (5) communication, (6) knowledge and skill development, (7) appropriate care and education, and (8) evaluation of partnership success. Results from a field study that included more than 200 reviewers and 8 pilot sites are summarized. Results indicate that a majority of reviewers found the training materials easy to understand, relevant to their work, and up-to-date. In addition, data gathered from the pilot sites indicate that the partnerships found the materials practical and useful for addressing a variety of issues, including time constraints, communication gaps, differences in professional training, and funding limitations.

> We will need to become savvy about how to build relationships, how to nurture growing, evolving things. All of us will need better skills in listening, communicating, and facilitating groups, because these are the talents that build strong relationships. (Wheatley, 1992, p. 38)

Introduction

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Communities face a host of problems that threaten the health and well-being of their children and families. Poverty, unemployment, inadequate care/education, and poor health care are just a few of the difficult issues that communities must confront. What makes these issues particularly challenging is that children and families who experience one problem are often likely to experience other problems as well.

Compounding the problem is that delivery of services to help children and families is typically fragmented and scattered. Even efforts designed to increase the quality and supply of services to children and families have, at times, created greater fragmentation and discontinuity.

In previous years, those who sought to improve outcomes for children concentrated only on the child. Today, however, many service providers have come to understand that the best way to serve and preserve children is to serve and preserve the supportive networks that benefit children (Family Support America, 1996). An extensive body of research identifies the elements that contribute to children's well-being, beginning with those closest to the child and moving outward to encompass the family, early care/education, the neighborhood, the community, and beyond. This ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) has motivated a growing number of communities to focus more closely on the need for collaboration--engaging in a process that allows the community to address many problems at once rather than one at a time.

One solution that many communities have adopted is the establishment of a collaborative partnership involving all the relevant partners--home, school, and service providers--in the planning and monitoring of services for children (Kagan, 1992; Hoffman, 1991). The goal of most of these collaboration initiatives is to improve child outcomes, recognizing that many of the child's needs are closely linked to needs of the family and the community.

Challenges to Collaboration

Community collaboratives/partnerships represent one of the most challenging--yet one of the most effective--efforts for creating a flexible, comprehensive system that meets the needs of children and families. They involve new relationships among service providers and the children and families they serve. They require time, resources, and the willingness of collaborating agencies to learn about and establish trust with each other. In short, they require change (Bruner, Kunesh, & Knuth, 1992).

As a result of the new roles and responsibilities that service providers must assume, collaboratives/partnerships encounter many common difficulties, including (Melaville, Blank, & Asayesh, 1996):

- staff or agency representatives who are resistant to relinquishing power;
- policies and regulations within individual agencies that make it difficult to coordinate services, information, and resources;
- differences in prior knowledge, training, or experience that make it difficult for members to communicate and work together; and
- lack of time to meet and plan together.

Many factors contribute to the success or failure of a community collaborative, and no two collaboratives operate in exactly the same way. However, certain guidelines seem to help smooth the way for a more successful partnership, including (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1993):

- involve all key stakeholders;
- establish a shared vision of how the partnership will operate and expected outcomes for the children and families served;
- build in ownership at all levels;
- establish communication and decision-making processes that are open and allow conflict to be addressed constructively;
- institutionalize changes through established policies, procedures, and program mandates;

- provide adequate time for partners to meet, plan, and carry out activities.

The process of establishing and maintaining a collaborative partnership is not easy, and in the end, each partnership must find a way to proceed that is consistent with its community and unique set of circumstances. However, a number of resources and tools are available to help communities get started creating an effective system for delivering services. In this article, we describe one such tool that assembles elements essential to building a successful collaborative partnership.

Development of *Continuity Framework* Materials

For the past eight years, the 10 Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) serving each region of the country have studied effective strategies for strengthening collaboration and increasing continuity among programs for young children and their families. The RELs are overseen by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement [now the Institute of Education Sciences], and their primary purpose is ensuring that those involved in educational improvement have access to the best information from research and practice. During the contract period of 1995-2000, the RELs established a program called the Laboratory Network Program (LNP), which convened representatives from each Laboratory as a national network working on common issues.

In 1995, the Early Childhood LNP developed *Continuity in Early Childhood: A Framework for Home, School, and Community Linkages* (U.S. Department of Education, 1995), a document designed with two key purposes in mind: first, an emphasis on the need for children and families to receive comprehensive and responsive services, reflected in the eight elements of continuity outlined in the *Framework* (see Figure 1). Taken together, the elements are intended to promote a comprehensive understanding of continuity and transition during early childhood. Second, the *Framework* offered a set of guidelines that partnerships could use to compare and assess their current policies and practices, as well as identify areas in need of improvement.

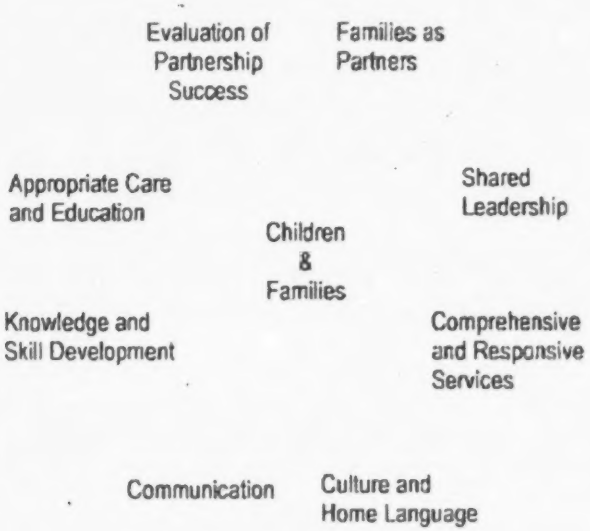

Figure 1. Elements of Continuity

(U.S Department of Education, 1995)

An extensive field review of the *Framework* indicated that although the document was helpful and informative, many community partnerships continued to have difficulty "getting started." As a result, a *Trainer's Guide* was developed to support the use of the *Framework* and assist community partnerships in the first stages. These materials were developed by the Early Childhood LNP in collaboration with the National Center for Early Development & Learning.

The *Trainer's Guide* provides an overview of the content and potential uses of the *Framework* and includes all activities and materials necessary to conduct training sessions. The *Guide* itself consists of four training sessions that are organized around the eight elements of continuity. The materials are designed so that a local partnership has everything needed to conduct the training: background information, scripts, handouts, transparencies, sample agendas, and checklists for additional equipment and supplies.

- The first session, *Understanding Continuity,* is designed to introduce participants to the *Framework* document and help participants develop a greater understanding and appreciation for continuity.
- The second session, *Developing a Continuity Team,* highlights the importance of broad representation and shared leadership among partnership members.
- The third session, *Planning for Continuity,* emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to service delivery and encourages participants to examine their current partnership practices and policies.
- The final session, *Formalizing Continuity,* focuses on the importance of effective communication among group members and provides participants with an opportunity to formulate action plans.

The *Guide* is designed to be a flexible training tool, adaptable to meet the needs of a particular audience. The intended audience includes local partnerships for children and families (including Smart Start partnerships in North Carolina), Head Start Program representatives, public schools, and communities. The overall objectives of the training are (1) to enhance the collaborative's knowledge and understanding of continuity, (2) to strengthen and support collaborative groups in their efforts to work as partners, and (3) to maximize the benefit they might receive from using the *Framework*.

What follows is a description of the field test that was designed to assess the use and effectiveness of the *Trainer's Guide*. The field test focused exclusively on the *Framework* materials--no other instructional sources were employed. We will present the major findings of the field test and summarize recommendations based on those findings. In addition, we will highlight the work of several collaborative partnerships that took part in the field study, and we will describe some of the problems they encountered, how they used the *Framework* materials to address those problems, and where they are today. Specifically, the evaluation will explore:

- To what extent is the information contained in the *Framework* and *Trainer's Guide* relevant and useful to community partnerships?
- What is the perceived impact of the training and *Framework* on partnership activities?
- How do partnerships incorporate elements of the *Framework* into their ongoing activities?
- Of the review sites that indicated interest in the training materials, what proportion actually conducted the training?

Method

The overall usefulness and effectiveness of the *Trainer's Guide* was studied in two phases. Phase One consisted of document review and feedback from individuals working in the early childhood field. In Phase Two of field testing, the training was actually piloted in eight partnership sites.

Phase One: Document Review

Reviewers for the *Trainer's Guide* were solicited through the Laboratory Network Program (LNP) and at conferences related to early childhood issues. Three hundred thirteen individuals/organizations requested a set of the *Framework* materials (participant manual, *Trainer's Guide*, and a sample color transparency) and feedback form. Feedback questions centered on four areas: (1) information's relevancy and accuracy, (2) format and organization of the *Trainer's Guide*, (3) specific training needs, and (4) possible barriers to conducting training.

Of the 313 requesting materials, 215 (68.7%) reviewers returned feedback forms. Twenty-one percent (N = 45) of the respondents were members of a Smart Start partnership (North Carolina initiative), 19% (N = 40) worked in Head Start agencies, and 11% (N = 24) worked in family resource centers. Others included representatives from state agencies, school personnel, and university faculty. A majority (89%) of the respondents indicated that they are actively involved in a community partnership.

Final Follow-up with Select Reviewer Sites. Of the original 215 organizations/individuals who reviewed the *Framework* materials, 80 indicated an interest in conducting the training in its entirety and requested a complete set of transparencies. (The original materials included one sample color transparency, and the REL offered a complete set of *Framework* transparencies to all organizations making the request.) Approximately one year after receiving the materials, interviews were conducted with representatives who received transparencies. The purpose of these follow-up telephone calls was to determine if the materials had been used and the degree to which outside support or assistance might be needed to conduct the training.

Phase Two: Pilot Training

During the second phase of the field testing, the training was piloted in eight collaborative partnerships from across the nation (see Table 1). These sites were recruited through the LNP and selected based on their interest in the project. To assist with logistical details, a liaison, identified at each site, coordinated training dates and assisted with data collection. Sites varied according to demographics, partnership maturity, and sponsoring or lead agency.

Table 1
Description of Pilot Sites

Site Location	Community Type	Sponsor/Lead Agency
Beaufort, SC	Rural	Success by 6
Dothan, AL	Urban	Family Resource Center
Walnut Cove, NC	Rural	Smart Start
Bovill, ID	Rural	School-based
Valdosta, GA	Rural	Family Connections/County Commission
Wheeling, WV	Rural	Head Start
Troy, NC	Rural	Smart Start
Concord, WV	Rural	Family Resource Center

Five of the partnerships described themselves as existing collaboratives (two years or more), while the remaining three indicated that they were in the planning stages of building a collaborative partnership. Sponsors of the partnerships included Smart Start (2); Head Start, family resource centers (2); Success by 6; a public school system; and a county task force.

Across the eight sites, a total of 160 individuals participated in the training. Approximately 64% of the attendees were White, 27% were African American, and the remainder were either Hispanic, American

Indian/Alaskan Native, or multiracial.

Several of the partnerships invited persons who were not part of the collaborative partnership to attend the training. As a result, slightly more than half (54%) of the participants reported that they were current members of the partnership. The majority of these had been members less than one year (53%). Early childhood specialists represented the largest group attending the training (29%), followed by program administrators (18%), teachers/caregivers (14%), and parents (10%). Other groups represented included policy makers, members of the business community, and university faculty.

Each of the sites conducted the entire training course in the fall; however, there was some variability in delivery of training. For example, some partnerships conducted the training as described in the *Trainer's Guide*--two complete, consecutive days of training. Other partnerships modified the training schedule to meet the needs of its members and used other formats such as one day of training followed two weeks later by a second day of training.

At the conclusion of training, participants were asked to provide feedback on specific elements of the training, including organization, training content, and materials/resources. In addition, participants were asked to comment on their satisfaction with the training and the overall usefulness of the training materials. This information, along with information gathered from the review sites, was used to revise the *Trainer's Guide*.

In the six months following the training, partnership activities were studied to determine the degree to which the collaboratives incorporated content from the *Framework* into their regular activities. Materials studied included a record of stakeholder attendance and meeting minutes documenting partnership activities. At the end of this period, a follow-up survey was sent to participants at each pilot site. Survey questions focused on three major areas: (1) impact of the training, (2) impact of the *Framework* materials, and (3) overall familiarity with *Framework* materials.

In addition to the final survey with individuals who participated in the training, a final interview was conducted with seven site liaisons (one liaison was unavailable for interview). Interview questions focused on the original goal of the partnership, reasons for participating in the field study, and impact of the training and *Framework* materials.

Results

The data were analyzed to determine general response patterns and to identify logical changes or improvements to the *Trainer's Guide*. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques were used to analyze data from the review sites and the pilot sites.

Phase One: Document Review

Analyses of data from reviewer sites were conducted on 215 surveys. Table 2 summarizes the percentage of respondents who rated the *Trainer's Guide* as easy to understand, relevant to their work, accurate, and up-to-date.

Table 2
Percentage of Respondents Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed with Statement*

Survey Statement	Agreed or Strongly Agreed with Statement
Information is accurate and up to date.	94.9% (4.54)
Format is easy to understand and follow.	93.9% (4.49)

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Training materials were easy to understand and follow.	92.5% (4.46)
Information is relevant to my work.	89.3% (4.41)
I would be comfortable using the materials.	83.3% (4.29)
*Note: According to the scale, 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Mean scores are presented in parentheses.	

A series of open-ended questions provided respondents with an opportunity to provide more specific information and feedback. When asked what parts of the training were most useful, of those who responded, approximately 30% reported that the materials were the most useful part of the training. Reviewers specifically mentioned handouts, transparencies, and checklists. Another 22% reported that the information focusing on the need to include families and share leadership responsibilities was most useful.

Reviewers also were asked to identify the greatest training need within their partnerships. Of those who responded, more than one-third (34%) reported that they often need assistance identifying and including community stakeholders. Reviewers cited family members and members of the business community as groups that often are poorly represented at partnership meetings. Other topics representing challenges to partnerships included developing the team, sharing leadership responsibilities, and involving families in meaningful ways.

In terms of barriers or factors that would influence the use of training, most of the respondents (75%) cited time as the greatest barrier to conducting training. This factor was followed by a lack of funding (68%), the unavailability of a trainer (45%), and lack of interest of collaborative partners (39%).

Final Follow-up with Select Reviewer Sites. Of the 80 individuals/organizations who requested a complete set of transparencies, 68 were located for follow-up interviews (85%). For the remaining 12, attempts to contact the site were unsuccessful; either the person requesting the transparencies was no longer there, or the materials were never received.

Interviews revealed that 23 of the respondents had conducted training using the *Framework* and accompanying materials. Of those who stated that they had conducted the training, only two (less than 10%) had used the training in its entirety. Most had conducted at least one part of the training, selecting the portions most useful for their work. "Families as Partners," "Shared Leadership," and "Comprehensive and Responsive Services" were the elements from the *Framework* most often used for training.

An additional 17% said that although they had not conducted the training as designed, they had adapted the materials or used them in other circumstances. Examples of how they had adapted the materials included using the exercises, overheads, major concepts, and other information in training activities.

Head Start agencies were the primary sponsors for half of the training events. Public schools, area education associations, state departments of education, local partnerships, child development centers, and related-type centers were listed as sponsors or lead agencies for the remaining training activities.

Training participants included staff and administrators at Head Start agencies, preschool and child care providers, local education agencies, schools, school improvement teams, state departments of education staff, local family service agencies and boards of directors, and parents.

All who said they had used the training materials were asked to comment on the usefulness of the training. The majority of respondents rated the training as "very useful" or "useful," and all said they would recommend the training to others. Particular aspects of the training that respondents liked included:

- professional quality, clarity of materials, and sequencing of content of the *Framework;*
- handouts, activities, and overheads;

- content and the ability to present the material at multiple skill levels; and
- ease of use of the *Framework*.

There were suggestions for improving the training. Four respondents said the course was "too long," especially if used in school systems or with parents. Others maintained a need for greater emphasis on action planning and implementation, "more written support materials (research, position support, background), and additional copies of key pieces of materials that helped shape the *Framework*."

Phase Two: Pilot Training

In terms of the training quality and overall effectiveness, most of the participants rated the training sessions as either "good" or "excellent." Participants tended to rate the second day of training as higher in quality and more effective than the first day of training ($M = 4.392$ and $M = 4.17$, respectively, based on a 5-point scale).

Participants also evaluated the effects of the training and estimated its impact on future partnership practices. Using a four-point Likert-type scale, participants rated the extent to which they agreed with each statement. Table 3 summarizes participants' appraisal of the training and reinforces the focus of the original training objectives.

Table 3
Summary of Participants' Reactions to Training by Objective*

Objective 1: To enhance the collaborative's knowledge and understanding of continuity	Mean	Standard Deviation
As a result of the training, I believe that I am motivated to build and strengthen continuity efforts in my community.	3.44	.65
As a result of the training, I believe that I have a better understanding of continuity and why it is important.	3.41	.65
I believe that this training will have an impact on increasing awareness of new skills and knowledge for our team.	3.31	63
Objective 2: To strengthen and support collaborative groups in their efforts to works as partners		
As a result of the training, I believe that I am better able to participate as a member of a home, school, and community partnership.	3.40	.65
I believe that this training will have an impact on how decisions are made and the planning we do for services.	3.25	.59
I believe that this training will have an impact on changing/enhancing the quality of community practices.	3.23	.58
Objective 3: To maximize the benefit the collaborative might receive from using the *Framework*		
As a result of the training, I believe that I am better able to use the *Framework* as a tool for exploring continuity and transition	3.26	.63
General		

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I believe that this training will have an impact on positively affecting outcomes for children and families.	3.31	.63
*Note: According to the scale, 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree.		

In addition to participant ratings immediately following the training, data were collected on regular partnership activities after the training. Analysis of materials such as meeting minutes revealed that during the six months following completion of the training, five of the eight sites reported that they continued to use the *Framework* materials. Exactly how the materials were used varied from site to site. Two of the sites selected specific elements of the *Framework* as their priority concerns for the coming year. They then organized subcommittees to review the partnerships' practices with respect to those elements and make recommendations for improving existing services. Another partnership used the materials to provide training to other agencies and organizations not directly involved with the partnership. The remaining two partnerships used the *Framework* as a resource for improving transition practices with their communities.

At the end of the six months, a final survey was distributed to participants at the last partnership meeting of the year, and surveys were mailed to those not in attendance at the final meeting. Approximately half of the individuals who participated in the training (81 of 160) responded to the survey. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which the *Framework* materials had had an impact on partnership practices. On a four-point scale (4 = "a great deal," 3 = "some," 2 = "very little," and 1 = "not at all"), the majority of respondents (88.6%) reported that the training had "impacted" their knowledge and skill development "some" or a "great deal." Respondents also thought that the *Framework* had at least "some" impact on the knowledge and skills development of their partnership (83%) and community (72%). The majority (97.4%) speculated that the *Framework* would have at least some future impact.

Finally, participants were asked to indicate the single greatest impact they experienced as a result of the training. Approximately 41% reported that as a result of the training they felt more motivated to build or strengthen efforts to support continuity of services for children in their communities. Thirty-five percent of the respondents said they had a better understanding of continuity and its importance; 17% felt that the training prepared them to be better members of their partnership; and 7% said that the training gave them a greater understanding of the *Framework* as a tool.

Stokes County Partnership for Children, King, NC

An ongoing goal of the Stokes County Partnership for Children is to create a system that encourages service providers to work together and promotes continuity for children and their families. Members of the partnership began by using the *Framework* to build their own knowledge and skills about continuity; however, they soon recognized the need to inform others of the importance of continuity in children's lives. As a result, the Partnership conducted a series of focus groups and meetings among parents and family members within the community. They used information from Elements 3 (Comprehensive/Responsive Services) and 7 (Developmentally Appropriate Care/Education) to explain what was needed to support continuity and its potential benefits for children. These meetings were also an opportunity to inform families of the various resources and supports available within the community. Later, the focus groups were expanded to include *all* stakeholders (e.g., child care, kindergarten, Head Start, school administrators, special needs coordinators, etc). The information gathered from these meetings has been used to guide the development and implementation of policies and practices that promote continuity.

Final Interview with Liaisons. In the final interview conducted with site liaisons, five of the seven liaisons reported that the overall goal of their partnership is to improve services for children and their families by connecting agencies and strengthening the collaborative bonds between those agencies. Three of the liaisons specifically mentioned the need to improve transitions and create a system of responsive and

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comprehensive services.

In addition, liaisons were asked to talk about their reasons for participating in the field-test process. At least three of the liaisons cited low levels of collaboration across agencies and indicated that partnership meetings were used primarily as a time for sharing information. Others saw the training as an opportunity to invite additional partners to the table and begin a discussion of how they could better work together.

Finally, liaisons were asked to rate the extent to which the *Framework* materials had been helpful in accomplishing their overall partnership goal. Using a five-point scale, five of the liaisons rated the *Framework* materials as either "helpful" (4) or "very helpful" (5). The remaining two liaisons rated the *Framework* materials as at least "somewhat helpful" (3).

Discussion

Developing and maintaining a community collaborative is hard work, and it is a challenge that requires a great deal of commitment and cooperation from those involved. Training and resource materials available to help community partnerships build a more responsive system must address such issues as time constraints, communication gaps, differences in professional training, and funding limitations. Given these challenges, the *Continuity Framework* and its *Trainer's Guide* seem to be important and useful tools for helping partnerships increase collaboration and involvement.

Data gathered from participant ratings and key-informant interviews indicated that the training was helpful in a number of ways. A feature of the training mentioned by many of the participants was the fact that the experience helped "level the playing field." That is, it provided stakeholders with a common language to use as they worked together. As illustrated in the following example, stakeholders often come from a variety of agencies and backgrounds, which can be a major impediment when a community must begin to work together and coordinate its efforts.

The case studies in the sidebars highlight the work of four collaborative partnerships that took part in the field study. These case studies discuss some of the problems they encountered, how they used the *Framework* materials to address those problems, and where they are today.

Bovill, Idaho, Collaborative

Bovill is a small town (population 310) located in the north central part of the state. Bovill has no resident doctor or dentist. At the time, there also was no child care center or preschool available to children. (The closest one was 35 miles away.)

In 1998, various members of the community decided that they wanted to do something to help improve the situation for children. This group of citizens brought together parents and virtually every local organization to work on a plan that would support the learning needs of children and their families. Part of this effort was a proposal submitted to the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation that would help fund an early learning center. In 1999, they were awarded a grant, and they began the work to open the Bovill Early Childhood Community Learning Center.

However, once the work began, members of the partnership found that they did not have a common vocabulary to talk about the issues of early childhood education. There were also difficulties associated with establishing a partnership, such as "Who else should be included?" and "How do you get started?" In an effort to "get started" and begin the planning process, the partnership elected to participate in the field testing of the *Framework* materials.

Framework training was provided over two consecutive days and built into the inservice

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training schedule of the elementary school. In addition to staff and faculty from the elementary school, representatives from other agencies and organizations participated, including the health department, the Idaho Department of Disabilities, news media, schools, early childhood education, Even Start, parents, university students, attorneys, community leaders, and businesses.

According the site liaison, the *Framework* materials were used:

- To improve awareness of key issues in providing high-quality services. The *Framework* provides direction to help develop a program that really works.
- To provide a common language and for internal communication enhancement. Now everyone "speaks the same language."
- As an external communication tool. According to the liaison, "it is so much easier to talk with funding sources when you use the structure of the elements as a base."
- To validate their progress toward providing the best practices in early childhood education.
- As a piece of the Bovill Elementary School improvement plan.

Positive impact on individual partnership members was cited as another basis for success of the training. Many indicated they had a better understanding of continuity and were more motivated to continue to work on the difficult issues that often arise as part of the collaborative process. An added value of the training was the opportunity to spend time together and develop relationships with persons from other agencies. Often, these individual relationships help form the basis for collaborative work within the partnership.

Based on the sites that continued to use the materials, the *Continuity Framework* and its *Trainer's Guide* seem to be equally useful to both existing and newly established partnerships. A common experience in the maturation of partnerships is that they are prone to lose initial momentum, often stagnating into "easy" roles such as simple information sharing. A serendipitous discovery of this study is that such partnerships evidenced rejuvenation of their efforts after participating in the training (see the Valdosta, Georgia, example).

Valdosta, Georgia, Collaborative

The Lowndes County/Valdosta Commission for Children and Youth has been in existence for more than a decade, and during this time, the partnership has experienced various "ups and downs." According to site liaison Vickie Elliott, cycles are a normal part of the collaborative process, "They may be the result of staff turnover or changes in the board chair and/or board members." She reports that participation in the training provided members with practical, research-based information. This information served as a reminder to members that they were doing good work and that their work was important.

Since the training, the partnership has continued to use *Framework* materials as a reference and resource. For example, during a recent meeting, members began a discussion regarding the evaluation of partnership activities. They used Element 8: Evaluation of Partnership Success to help shape and guide this discussion. In addition, the partnership has applied for and received a 21st Century Learning Community grant. Because of the knowledge and understanding they gained during the training, members requested funds for a case manager position to be based at each school and conducting home visits. It is hoped that this strategy will facilitate communication and create greater continuity of services for students and families.

Finally, the data indicate that change takes place slowly. Participants reported that the training had had some impact on their community but felt that the greatest impact was yet to come. Bringing everyone to

the table is not enough. True collaboration that produces continuity in services for children takes place over a long period of time, as agencies that have not previously worked together begin to get to know each other and slowly modify procedures and practices.

Marshall County Tadpole Team, Wheeling, WV

Efforts to collaborate are often driven by the realization that single agencies cannot solve problems alone. Partners must be willing to jointly plan and implement new ventures, as well as pool resources such as money and personnel. Nowhere is this need to collaborate and pool resources more crucial than in Marshall County, WV. Located in the northern part of West Virginia, Marshall County remains a predominantly rural county. With a population of approximately 36,000, Marshall County has seen a decline in the number of residents over the past two to three years, largely attributed to the economic hardships of the area. This part of West Virginia relies heavily on the coal and steel industries, and as these industries have fallen on hard times, so too have many families. As a result, many families have moved away to find other employment; however, many others have sought support from social services agencies within the community. In order to make the most of the limited resources and support available within the county, many of the local agencies (e.g., Northern Panhandle Head Start, Starting Points Center, Tadpoles Team) came together to form a community collaborative. Although their collaborative meetings began more as a time for sharing information, members soon realized that to be a true "working group," they would need to broaden the meeting agendas and formalize the collaborative relationships. Using the *Framework* materials as an assessment tool, members worked through each element identifying the gaps in services and generating ideas for possible programs and procedures to address those gaps. This shift encouraged members to devote meeting times to discussing specific issues facing the community. Moreover, it encouraged members to formalize the partnership with written agreements. These agreements have allowed members to make a solid commitment to the collaborative, as well as clarify specific roles and responsibilities for services.

Beyond the content of the training and issues related to the collaborative process, the field study underscored the importance of training structure and design. Many study participants praised the *Framework* materials for flexibility and relevance to a variety of contexts. The training materials were designed so that particular attention was devoted to issues such as target audience attributes (e.g., varied educational and professional development backgrounds), which dictate the appropriate level of sophistication as well as the need for course module structure (i.e., overall organization and scripting) to be highly adaptable to local training needs.

Conclusion

The field studies indicate that community partnerships benefit from training and technical assistance that help with the process of getting started, as well as recapturing momentum and focus. Additional research is needed to document the ongoing efforts of these communities and explore whether the *Framework* materials continue to have an impact on community practices and outcomes, as many of the participants predicted. Further study also is needed to determine what other kinds of training or technical assistance might be useful to these partnerships as they work to build capacity and expand or grow new programs.

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